

KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

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The School as Social Center

by John Dewey

Most of our pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, only by the promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding.

The function of education, since anything which might pass by that name was found among savage tribes, has been social. The particular organ or structure, however, through which this aim was subserved, and the nature of its adjustment to other social institutions, have varied according to the peculiar condition of the given time. The general principle of evolution—development from the undifferentiated toward the formation of distinct organs through division of labor—stands out clearly in a survey of educational history.

With the development of the state has come a certain distinction between state and society. As I use these terms, I mean by *state* the organization of the resources of community life through governmental machinery of legislation and administration. I mean by *society* the less definite and freer play of the forces of the community which goes on in the daily intercourse and contact of men in an endless variety of ways that have nothing to do with politics or government or the state in any institutional sense. Now, the control of education by the state inevitably carried with it a certain segregation of the machinery of both school administration and instruction from the freer, more varied, and more flexible modes of social intercourse. So true is this that for a long time the school was occupied exclusively with but one function, the purveying of intellectual material to a certain number of selected minds. Even when the democratic impulse broke into the isolated department of the school, it did not effect a complete reconstruction, but only the addition of another element. This was preparation for citizenship.

Citizenship, to most minds, means a distinctly political thing. It is defined in terms of relation to the government, not to society in its broader

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aspects. To be able to vote intelligently, to take such share as might be in the conduct of public legislation and administration—that has been the significance of the term.

Now our community life has suddenly awakened; and in awakening it has found that governmental institutions and affairs represent only a small part of the important purposes and difficult problems of life, and that even that fraction cannot be dealt with adequately except in the light of a wide range of domestic, economic, and scientific considerations quite excluded from the conception of the state of citizenship. We find that our political problems involve race questions, questions of the assimilation of diverse types of language and custom; we find that most serious political questions grow out of underlying industrial and commercial changes and adjustments; we find that most of our pressing political problems cannot be solved by special measures of legislation or executive activity, but only by the promotion of common sympathies and a common understanding. We find, moreover, that the solution of the difficulties must go back to a more adequate scientific comprehension of the actual facts and relations involved.

The isolation between state and society, between the government and the institutions of family, business life, etc., is breaking down. We realize the thin and artificial character of the separation. We begin to see that we are dealing with a complicated interaction of varied and vital forces, only a few of which can be pigeon-holed as governmental. The content of the term *citizenship* is broadening; it is coming to mean all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community.

The older idea of the school was that its primary concern was with the inculcation of certain facts and truths from the intellectual point of view, and the acquisition of certain forms of skill. When the school became public or common, this notion was broadened to include whatever would make the citizen a more capable and righteous voter and legislator; but it was still thought that this end would be reached along the line of intellectual instruction. To teach children the Constitution of the United States, the nature and working of various parts of governmental machinery, from the nation through the state and the county down to the township and the school district—to teach such things



was thought to prepare the pupil for citizenship. And so some 15 or 20 years ago, when the feeling arose that the schools were not doing all that they should be doing for our

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life as a whole, this consciousness expressed itself in a demand for a more thorough and extensive teaching of civics.

Recent inventions have so multiplied and cheapened the means of transportation, and the circulation of ideas and news through books, magazines, and papers, that it is no longer physically possible for one nationality, race, class, or sect to be kept apart from others, impervious to their wishes and beliefs. Cheap and rapid long-distance transportation has made America a meeting-place for all the peoples and tongues



of the world. The centralization of industry has forced members of classes into the closest association with, and dependence upon, each other. Bigotry, intolerance, or even an unswerving faith in the superiority of one's own religious and political creed are much shaken when individuals are brought face to face with each other, or have the ideas of others continuously and forcibly placed before them. The congestion of our city life is only one aspect of the bringing of people together which modern inventions have induced.

That many dangers result from sudden dislocations of people from the surroundings—physical, industrial, and intellectual—to which they have become adapted; that great instability may accompany this sudden massing of heterogeneous elements, goes without saying. On the other hand, these very agencies present instrumentalities which may be taken advantage of. The best as well as the worst of modern newspapers is a product. The organized public library with its facilities for reaching all classes of people is an effect. The popular assembly and lyceum is another. No educational system can be regarded as complete until it adopts into itself the various ways by which social and intellectual intercourse may be promoted, and employs them systematically, not only to counteract dangers which these same agencies are bringing with them, but so as to make them positive causes in raising the whole level of life.

Along with this increasing intercourse and interaction, with all its dangers and opportunities, there has come a relaxation of the bonds of social discipline and control. I suppose none of us would be willing to believe that the movement away from dogmatism and fixed authority is anything but a movement in the right direction. But no

one can view the loosening of the power of the older religious and social authorities without deep concern. We may feel sure that in time independent judgment, with the individual freedom and responsibility that go with it, will more than make good the temporary losses. But meantime there is a temporary loss. Parental authority has much less influence in controlling the conduct of children. Reverence seems to decay on every side, and boisterousness and hoodlumism to increase. Flippancy toward parental and other forms of constituted authority waxes, while obedient orderliness wanes, the domestic ties between husband and wife with them. Selves, as well as to their children, lose something of their permanence and sanctity. The church, with its supernatural sanctions, its means of shaping the daily life of its adherents, finds its grasp slowly slipping away. We might as well frankly recognize that many of the old agencies for moralizing mankind, that kept men living decent, respectable, and orderly lives, are losing in efficiency—particularly



However much they may need the disciplinary training of a widened and enlightened education, the older generation needs it also. Besides, time is short, very short, for the average child in the average city school. The work is hardly more than begun there, and unless it is largely to go for naught, the community must find methods of supplementing it and carrying it farther, outside the regular school channel.

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those agencies whose force rested in custom, tradition, and unquestioning acceptance. It is impossible for society to remain purely a passive spectator in the midst of such a scene. It must search for other agencies with which it may repair the loss, and which may produce the results the former methods are failing to secure. Here, too, it is not enough for society to confine its work to children.

The intellectual life, facts, and truths of knowledge, are much more obviously and intimately connected with all other affairs of life than they ever have been at any previous period in the history of the world. Hence a purely and exclusively intellectual instruction means less than it ever meant before. And, again, the daily occupations and ordinary surroundings of life are much more in need of interpretation than ever they have been before. We might almost say that once there was a time when learning related almost wholly to a world outside and beyond that of the daily concerns of life itself. To study physics, to learn German, to become acquainted with Chinese history, were elegant accomplishments, but more or less useless from the standpoint of daily life. In fact, it is just this sort of idea which the term *culture* still conveys to many minds. Where learning was useful, it was only to a comparatively small and particularly select class in the community. It was something that only the doctor or lawyer or clergyman needed in his particular

calling, but so far away from and above the mass of mankind that it could only awaken their blind and submissive admiration.

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Under modern conditions, practically every sphere of learning, whether of social or natural science may impinge at once, and at any point, upon the conduct of life. German is not a fact, knowledge of which makes a distinction between a man and his fellow, but a mode of social and business intercourse. Physics is no longer natural philosophy—something concerned with remarkable discoveries about important but very remote laws; it is a set of facts which, through the applications of heat and electricity to our ordinary surroundings, constantly comes home to us. Physiology, bacteriology, anatomy, concern our individual health and the sanitation of our cities. Their facts are exploited in sensational if not scientific ways in the daily newspapers. And so we might go through the whole schedule of studies, once so foreign and alien, and show how intimately concerned they now are with commonplace life. The simple fact is that we are living in an age of applied science. It is impossible to escape the influence, direct and indirect, of the applications.

On the other hand, life is getting so specialized, the divisions of labor are carried so far, that nothing explains or interprets itself. The worker in a modern factory who is con-

cerned with a fractional piece of a complex activity, present to him only in a limited series of acts carried on with a distinct portion of a machine, is typical of much in our entire social life. The old worker knew something of his process and business as a whole. If he did not come into personal contact with all of it, the whole was so small and so close to him that he was acquainted with it. He was thus aware of the meaning of the particular part of the work which he himself was doing. He saw and felt it as a vital part of the whole, and his horizon was extended. The situation is now the opposite. Most people are doing particular things of whose exact reasons and relationships they are only dimly aware. The whole is so vast, so complicated, and so technical that it is next to out of the question to get any direct acquaintanceship with it. Hence we must rely upon instruction, upon interpretations that come to us through conscious channels. One of the chief reasons for the success of some of the great technical correspondence schools of the present day, besides the utilitarian desire to profit by preparation for better positions, is an honest eagerness to know something more of the great forces which condition the particular work one is doing and to get an insight into



those broad relations which are so partially yet tantalizingly hinted at. The same is true of the growing interest in forms of popular science, which is a marked portion of the stock in trade of some of the best and most successful of our modern monthly magazines.

It is commonly recognized that a doctor or a lawyer must go on studying all his life if he is to be a successful man in his profession. The reason is obvious enough. Conditions about him are highly unstable; new problems present themselves; new facts obtrude. Previous study of law, no matter how thorough and accurate, does not provide

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for these new situations. Hence the need of continual study. There are still portions of the country where the lawyer practically prepares himself before he enters upon his professional career: all he has to do afterward is to perfect himself in certain finer points, and get greater skill in the manipulation of what he already knows. But these are the more backward and unprogressive sections where change is gradual and infrequent, and where therefore the individual prepared once is prepared always.

Now, what is true of the lawyer and the doctor, in the more progressive sections of the country, is true to a certain extent of all sorts and degrees of people. Social, economic, and

intellectual conditions are changing at a rate undreamed of in past history, and unless the agencies of instruction are kept running more or less parallel with these changes, a considerable body of men is bound to find itself without the training which will enable it to adapt itself to what is going on. It will be left stranded and become a burden for the community to carry. Where progress is continuous and certain, education must be equally certain and continuous.

Everywhere we see signs of the growing recognition that the community owes to each one of its members the fullest opportunity for development. Everywhere we see the growing recognition that the community life is defective and distorted except as it does thus care for all its constituent parts. This is no longer viewed as a matter of charity, but as a matter of justice—may, even of something higher and better than justice—a necessary phase of developing and growing life. Men will long dispute about material socialism, about socialism considered as a matter of distribution of the material sources of the community; but there is a socialism regarding which there can be no such dispute: socialism of the intelligence and of the spirit. To extend the range and the fullness of sharing in the intellectual and spiritual resources of the community is the very meaning of the community.

John Dewey (1859-1952) was one of the leading philosophers in the American pragmatist tradition. He wrote extensively on the public, experience, art, and nature; but he may be best known for his groundbreaking philosophy of education. This essay is drawn from an address he delivered to the National Council of Education in Minneapolis, Minnesota, July 1902.
